Goodwill Has to Be Circumspect

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The Pali word citta means both heart and mind. So as we’re meditating and as we do the practice in all aspects of our life, remember that we’re training both the heart and the mind at the same time. Some of the teachings that seem to be primarily mind teachings or head teachings have their heart component as well. And some of the heart teachings have their head component too. Metta is one of them. We tend to think of metta simply as a quality of the heart, but it’s not. It’s both the heart and the mind together. On the one hand, it’s a quality of the mind. It’s a quality of will and emotion. And not just a feeling. The will has to be involved as well. It’s what you want out of life. You want to behave in a way that’s conducive to your own true happiness and the true happiness of others. But that word “true” there reminds you that you have to think about it, because there are all kinds of happiness. There are lots of ways you can please other people which are actually not in line with their true happiness. So you have to think about what you’re doing and what constitutes true happiness. There are some things we can do that are going to displease other people but don’t really interfere with their true happiness. In fact, if we try to please them, we’re sometimes contributing to their less-than-true happiness. So you’ve got to think about, when you’re dealing with other people, how you’re going to be able to do that. How does it actually translate into your choices? This is where it’s useful to have a good example. As I was mentioning this afternoon in my time with the Jon Fugang, I learned from his example that there are times when you say “no” and it’s the kind response. There are times when you have to be critical, and it’s the kind way of teaching people. Because you have to catch their attention to show them that what you’re saying really is important. And they can’t get by on simply good intentions alone, because we’re trying to do something better than good. It’s skillful. And that requires that you be observant. Part of the lesson lies in just learning from your own actions, but you’ve also got to learn from what other people do, how they act. Seeing a Jon Fugang interact with his students and with some people, he would humor, and other people he wouldn’t humor at all. And it wasn’t because he liked some people and didn’t like others. It was just that he realized that this is how you had to act with certain people and other people you had to be more strict with. In my own case, I noticed that he was a lot stricter with me than he was with some of the other monks staying with him. At first I felt he was being unfair, but then I realized that he was taking my practice seriously. As for the other monks, I began to see that they weren’t all that serious. So in that case, his strictness was actually a form of kindness, a form of goodwill. He wanted me to set my standards higher. Now, you may not be in the position where you’re teaching other people. But you do have to think about when someone asks something for you or they try to push you in a certain direction. Is it really for their well-being? Is it for your well-being? The ideal action is one that is for the well-being of both sides. If you find that helping someone else is going to harm you, the Buddha wouldn’t recommend that you do it. Or helping yourself in a way that harms others, he wouldn’t recommend that either. So you have to notice the difference between trying to be popular and actually having goodwill. Trying to be popular, trying to do what other people want you to do, there are no real standards there. But I noticed with the John Fung, he didn’t trust people who wanted to be popular because they could do anything. You have to have a clear sense of what’s truly in your best interest. And as they say, your own interest well understood, as opposed to your own interest poorly understood. Your own interest poorly understood is when all you can think about is grabbing what you can. Your own interest well understood is seeing what truly would lead to true happiness and would not harm others at the same time. There’s a passage where King Vessanity is with his queen, and he asks her, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Hoping, of course, that she will say, “Yes, of course, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” Well, even a king can’t get other people to say that, at least not in this particular case. She said, “No, is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And he had to admit, “Well, no, that wasn’t the case.” So that was the end of that scene. The Buddha sees the scene and reports the conversation. And the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You love yourself fiercely, and everybody else loves themselves fiercely. But the conclusion you draw from that is interesting. It’s not that you should just go out and fight for what you want. It’s that you shouldn’t harm anyone else. Because you realize, if your happiness depends on their harm, they’re not going to stand for it. Then you also start getting dishonest with yourself, saying,”Well, it doesn’t matter that they’re harmed.” That sets up a whole tassel of lies. You start lying to yourself, lying to other people, and that’s not going to be good for any kind of understanding or any kind of insight. But again, you have to be careful about what you say. What does it mean to harm someone else? It doesn’t mean to displease them. There’s the case where the Buddha was asked if he would ever say anything displeasing to others. It was meant as a trick question. If he said no, well, they had him on record for saying that his cousin Devadatta was a lickspittle, one of those words we don’t hear much of anymore. If he said yes, he would say displeasing things. Then they could say, “Well, what’s the difference between you and the ordinary person in the market?” But when the question was posed to the Buddha, he didn’t answer either yes or no. He said, “This deserves an analytical answer.” In other words, you have to parse it out. There are things that are true and untrue. There are things that are beneficial and not beneficial. And there are things that are timely and not timely. These are the things you have to think about when you speak. If something was not true, he wouldn’t say it. If it was true, then he had to go to the next test. Is it beneficial? Notice he doesn’t have any notion that something that was untrue could be beneficial. If it’s true, then the question is, is it beneficial or not to speak about it? If it’s not, you don’t say it. If it’s true and beneficial, then the next question is, when is the right time to say something pleasing and when is the right time to say something displeasing? You give the example of a child. They’ve got something sharp in its mouth. You can’t just leave the child there to swallow the sharp object. You’ve got to get it out, even if it means drawing blood. So in the same way, when you’re interacting with other people, the kind response may not necessarily be the one that they want to hear. But you have to find the right time and the right place and the right way to say what they don’t want to hear. That requires skill. And again, it’s useful to have an example. Watch the people around you who are skillful in this way. You’ll gain some ideas about how to handle situations that you’d ordinarily find difficult. So kindness doesn’t necessarily mean pleasing other people or doing what they want. You have to think about what is in someone’s true best interest, what’s in your best interest. And your best interests are to be virtuous, to train the mind. So you’ve got to take the precepts here as a clear standard. And then in the rest of the areas of your life where there are no clear standards, you look at the quality of your intention and learn from your mistakes. Try to be observant about what works and what doesn’t work. It’s never too late to learn. Sometimes we think that as adults we’ve developed our habits and it’s hard to get out of our habits. In some cases, it can be. But at least you still have the opportunity to learn. You can learn all the way up to your last breath if you’re willing to notice where you’ve made mistakes. And you try to get advice from other people about how to do things differently. This is the Buddha’s instructions to his son. He said, “Try to avoid mistakes, but if you make mistakes, admit them to yourself and then go talk them over with somebody. Don’t be embarrassed.” Get their advice on how to handle that particular situation. In a more skillful way. This is why the Buddha didn’t just leave a body of teachings. He also instituted the Sangha. And the pattern of education in the Sangha wasn’t a series of classes with exams. It was an apprenticeship. You lived with your teacher and tried to pick up the teacher’s habits. Of course, there’s a possibility the teacher might not be totally skillful in all areas, but try to notice where the teacher is skillful and try to emulate that. The Buddha didn’t just leave general principles like compassion, emptiness, all the big words that get thrown around when people talk about Buddhism. He said you should have a sense of time and place. You should know how much is enough, what your strengths and weaknesses are. After all, we are learning a skill. And a skill is a matter, particularly a matter, both of the head and the heart here, as we’re training the mind and the heart in our interactions with others. You’ve got to think about what’s going to happen as a result of what we’re doing. Try to have a clear sense of cause and effect. That’s the head part. Then there’s the heart part. You want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. It’s not warm fuzzies. It’s a clear combination of what kind of aspiration really is worthwhile and how you’re going to go about it. So remember, even metta, goodwill, is an issue both of the head and the heart. Try to bring your intelligence to both sides.

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